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SUBJECT: PANAMA: MARTINELLI MAINTAINS LEAD BUT LOSES GROUND
TO HERRERA

Summary

1. Democratic Change (CD) opposition presidential candidate Ricardo Martinelli lost six points in the polls, shortly after naming former Panamenista Party presidential candidate Juan Carlos Varela as his vice presidential running mate and thereby cementing a grand opposition "Alliance For Change" movement, according to Dichter and Neira's presidential poll for the week of February 15. Martinelli still maintained a 12 point lead over Revolutionary Democratic Party (PRD) candidate Balbina Herrera, whose stalled campaign appeared to have been kick started, rallying for a five point gain since February 1. Martinelli probably also took a hit for not participating in a debate hosted by a television broadcaster on February 10; Herrera "debated" solo responding to questions from journalists. Former President Guillermo Endara, heading his Moral Vanguard for the Nation (MVN) party's ticket, stubbornly remains in the race but is trapped in no man's land at five percent and received fewer votes than the number of mock ballots left blank in Dichter and Neira's poll. For all intents and purposes, Panama now has a head-to-head race for its presidency.

Momentum Shifts As Martinelli Loses Ground

2. When asked who they would vote for if the 2009 elections were held today, 49 percent of respondents to Dichter and Neira's latest presidential poll said they supported opposition candidate Martinelli and 37 percent said they supported ruling party candidate Herrera. Herrera has gained five points since February 1, climbing slowly from 32 percent of voter preference the first week to 33 percent the next, then gaining steam to finish with 37 percent last week, her highest numbers since January. Opposition golden boy Martinelli lost six points, falling from 55 percent in the first week of February to 53 percent the next, and dropping still further to 49 percent in the week of February 15, as some voters clearly migrated to the Herrera camp. It remains to be seen whether the latest numbers reflected a momentary dip in the polls for Martinelli or signalled the beginning of a downward trend. Martinelli's dip in the polls as well as Herrera's gradual ascent came in the wake of Martinelli's formation of a grand opposition "Alliance for Change" and his refusal to debate Herrera on February 10; Herrera "debated" solo responding to journalists' questions.

3. Contrary to Dichter and Neira's more recent data, the three other monthly polls indicated that Martinelli pulled further ahead of Herrera in February, but only by three to five points. The three other polls also showed that Herrera

gained from three to five percent of voter preference in the last month: According to IPSOS, Martinelli now leads by 17 points, up from a 12 point lead in January. Martinelli gained ten points to win 51 percent of voter preference and Herrera gained five points to capture 34 percent of voter preference. (Polling took place February 6 to 8 and included 1,040 people. The margin of error was three percent.) According to SigmaDos, Martinelli led by a more modest eight points in February, up from a five point lead in January. SigmaDos gave Martinelli 48 percent of voter preference, representing a six point gain from January, while Herrera garnered 40 percent, a three point gain for her from the previous month. (The poll included 1,428 people and had a margin of error of 2.6 percent.) According to Unimer, Martinelli led by 22 points in February, up from 18 points in January. Unimer gave Martinelli 50 percent of voter preference, up seven points from January, and Herrera held 28.5 percent of voter preference, up three points from January. (Polling took place February 4 to 6 and included 2,500 people. The margin of error was 2.8 percent.)

Herrera Base Remains Strong

¶4. Herrera has maintained the strongest base of committed voters since Dichter and Neira's polling began in January. In the latest poll for the week of February 15, when asked who they would vote for if elections were held today, 31 percent of PRD party members said they would vote for Herrera, while 25 percent of CD party members would vote for Martinelli. Herrera also rallied the highest number of

committed voters according to the SigmaDos monthly poll, where of those who support Herrera, 91 percent said they would definitely vote for her. Of those who support Martinelli, 86 percent said they would definitely vote for him. When asked in the second week of February if they believed that the National Assembly would be dominated by the parties that supported Herrera or the parties that supported Martinelli, 40.3 percent stated that the parties that supported Herrera would dominate, while only 33.8 percent stated it would be parties who supported Martinelli.

Effect of Varela as VP Pick

¶5. Martinelli's selection of former presidential candidate Juan Carlos Varela of the Panamenista Party (PP) as his vice-presidential running mate appeared to give him an initial boost in the Dichter and Neira poll, taking him from 46 percent of voter preference in the last week of January to 55 percent in the first week of February, representing a nine point gain. However, Martinelli's numbers have steadily declined since then, indicating that voters may not view the alliance favorably on further reflection. In the first week of February, when asked if an alliance between CD and Panamenista Party was intended to benefit the country or was an electoral strategy to win votes, 50.8 percent of respondents felt that it was a strategy to win votes. In the most recent Dichter and Neira poll for the week of February 15, the same period corresponding to a four point drop in voter preference for Martinelli, when asked whether they believed that political alliances were principally for the benefit of the country or the politicians, 61.4 percent said that they were for the benefit of the politicians. There was no significant boost in numbers as a result of the Panamenista Party joining the CD, the Patriotic Union (UP), and Movement of Liberal Republican Nationals (MOLIRENA) in the Martinelli-led "Alliance for Change." Dichter and Neira showed a six point loss and, according to the monthly polls, Martinelli made a modest three to five point gain over Herrera from January to February.

Importance of Candidate Platform

¶6. When asked in the second week of February whether the candidates' platforms were important or irrelevant when voting, a whopping 85.7 percent of those polled responded that they were indeed important. This sentiment on the part of voters may have played into Martinelli's recent six point slide. Martinelli's refusal to participate in the February 10 presidential debate gave Balbina Herrera an hour of prime time media coverage to sell her platform, and was viewed by 320,000 Panamanians. Just after the debate, according to the Dichter and Neira poll for the week of February 15, when asked whether they approved or disapproved of Martinelli's failure to participate in the debate, 66.3 percent of voters indicated their disapproval; voter preference for Martinelli dropped another four points during this time.

The Navarro Effect

¶7. When asked in the second week of February whether they believed that criticism of incumbent President Martin Torrijos by Herrera's VP running mate and PRD National Executive Committee (CEN) member Juan Carlos Navarro helped or hurt Herrera's presidential ambitions, 70 percent of respondents stated that the criticism had a negative effect. Interestingly, when asked the following week who in the PRD party would be in the best position to unify the PRD after the elections, 31.6 percent of respondents felt it would be Herrera, while a virtually equal number felt that Juan Carlos Navarro would be a better unifier, at 31.2 percent.

Voters Pessimistic

¶8. When asked in the second week of February whether the country was or was not on a good path, 64.4 percent of respondents felt that Panama was not on a good path, while only 29.8 percent felt that the country was headed in the right direction.

Technical Data

¶9. Third Dichter and Neira February poll: Dichter and Neira conducted 1,226 interviews of men and women over the age of 18 who are residents of Panama. The poll was conducted nationally, except in the remote and difficult to reach Darien Province and indigenous people's autonomous regions (comarcas). Interviews were conducted face-to-face in individuals' homes from Friday, February 13 to Sunday, February 15. Sampling was multi-staged. The first stage distributed the total sample according to population by province as well as rural and urban precincts, and in the second stage blocks were randomly selected and homes were first randomly and then systematically selected. The margin of error for the poll was assessed at +/- 2.9 percent with a confidence level of 95 percent.

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STEPHENSON